

Subject: cowry shell currency

Birmingham Public Library
+ Museum

[Birmingham, AL]

1934

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January 8, 1934.

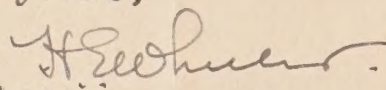
American Numismatic Society,
Broadway & 156th Street,
New York City.

Gentlemen:

In a rather comprehensive Exhibit featuring MOLLUSKS AND CIVILIZATION which the Museum is putting on at this time, we desire to tell the story of shells used as money. In working up the cowry as money of primitive peoples we do not seem to find sufficient information covering the transition from the cowry shell in India to the coins known as cowry money. Would it be possible for you to give us the data concerning this whole matter, including the dates when coins were first introduced, the kinds of cowry moneys used in India or elsewhere, and where I could procure examples for exhibition, either lent or purchased?

Trusting to have your prompt reply, I am

Sincerely yours,


Curator,
Birmingham Museum,
Public Library.

HEW/ehb

January 10, 1934.

Mr. H. E. Wheeler
Curator Birmingham Museum
Public Library
Birmingham, Ala.

Dear Sir:

In answer to your question concerning the cowry shell used as money I am at a loss to know just what you mean when you say "from the transition of the cowry shell in India to the coins known as cowry money". As you probably know, from earliest times the cowry has come chiefly from the Maldive Islands and were evidently used in China from prehistoric times. From old tombs, probably dating back into the second millennium B. C., from central China cowry shells have been found, some intact - others with the tops broken off. In some tombs bone imitations showing the notched slit in the bottom have been found with the cowries; also, some bronze gilded pieces. Whether these latter were money or simply ceremonial objects has not been proven. I cannot say when the cowry went out of circulation in China. In India they have been used from ancient times, and in out of the way villages up to fairly recent times have been used as a subdivision of the smallest copper coin. We have also examples from the East coast of Africa. In Bengal I think they circulated in bags containing 12,000. They were also used in Siam and in fact throughout the whole of the littoral of the Indian Ocean. I find this table in India: In 1740 - 2400 cowries equalled a rupee, in 1756 - 2560, and in 1870 in Madras 5,760 made a rupee.

I know of no coin in India derived from the cowry. A small flat oval piece which the Chinese termed as "Ghost head money" and which was in use in the Chow Dynasty, possibly around 300 or 400 B. C. may have been derived from the cowry. They seem to have come in two varieties. Both have been found in ancient tombs, one with a yellow stripe and one with a purple top. Under separate cover, I am enclosing one of each. If you wish, I might be able to lend you some of the ancient ones as well as some at one time used in Africa.

Very truly yours,

HW:JG

Curator

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January 15, 1934.

Mr. Howland Wood, Curator,
The American Numismatic Society,
Broadway between 155th and 156th Streets,
New York, N. Y.

Dear Mr. Wood:

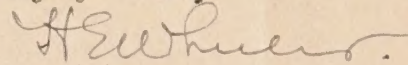
I appreciate very much your letter of January 10.
It gives us information which is valuable to us in develop-
ing our story of SHELLS AND CIVILIZATION.

What I would like to find would be a handful or
less of some of those very minute copper coins used in India,
perhaps even now, which would be nearest in value to the
cowry shell. Years ago I had some of these small coins, one
or two of which were issued, as I remember, by native mints,
or at least with native inscriptions on them. There were
coins of quite recent mintage and practically uncirculated
which were undoubtedly coined by the British Government.

We have any number of the cowry shells themselves,
none however which were actually taken from the tombs. These,
indeed, would be interesting.

Thanking you for your generous interest, I am

Sincerely yours,



Curator,
Museum Dep't,
Public Library.

HEW/ehb

January 19, 1934.

Mr. H. E. Wheeler, Curator
Museum Department, Public Library
Birmingham, Alabama.

Dear Mr. Wheeler:

About the only coins that we have in any quantities are some fairly thick, that is $1/4$ of an inch, copper rectangular dumps that measure anywhere from $1/2$ inch to 1 inch in size, made at Hyderabad. If these will do we can send you on a number. Do we understand that you would like also on loan some of the older cowry shells from Chinese tombs?

Very truly yours,

HW:JG

Curator

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January 22, 1934.

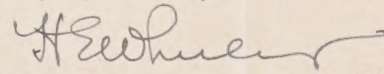
Mr. Howland Wood, Curator,
The American Numismatic Society,
New York, N. Y.

Dear Mr. Wood:

Answering your letter of January 19 I should be very glad if you would send me a few of the Indian coins mentioned in your letter. I am still at a loss to know why the very small Indian coins minted by the British Government, and which I understand were in value about one-twentieth of a cent, do not show up. If you learn anything about these in the future please let me know.

I would welcome a few of the cowry shells taken from Chinese tombs. They would have the best care and would be promptly returned at the end of our Exhibit. Due credit would be given to the Numismatic Society.

Sincerely yours,


Curator,
Museum Department,
Public Library.

HEW/ehb

January 24, 1934. .

Mr. H. E. Wheeler, Curator
Museum Department, Public Library
Birmingham, Alabama.

Dear Mr. Wheeler:

Your letter just at hand and I am sending to you by parcel post insured three shell cowrys and three imitation bone cowrys mounted together, which came from a prehistoric Chinese tomb in HoNan, five similar cowrys from other tombs, 39 cowrys on a string from East Africa, fairly modern (These I am sending to show the resemblance to those used nearly 3000 years before), thirty small copper Kas from Travencore. These are the coins I think you have reference to. I wish to apologize for not thinking of these before.

Very truly yours,

HW:JG

Curator

3 Skull ~~Cervinus~~ } from Prehistoric
3 Bone " } Chinese tombs
in Ho nan

✓ from other tombs

39 Cervinus on string from E Africa

34 Kus from Travancore

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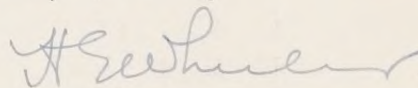
April 23, 1934

Mr. Howland Wood, Curator,
American Numismatic Society,
Broadway Bet. 155th & 156th Streets,
New York, N. Y.

Dear Sir:

We are returning the Cowrie Shells and
Cowrie money loaned to us for our recent Shell
Exhibit. This story of shells used as money
proved to be quite interesting and I appreciate
very much your co-operation in making this
exhibit a success.

Sincerely yours,



Curator.

HEW/ds

May 7, 1934.

Mr. H. E. Wheeler
Birmingham Public Library
Museum Department
Birmingham, Ala.

Dear Sir:

We beg to acknowledge your letter of April 23rd. The box containing the coins arrived today and the returned shipment is correct, except that you enclosed two small coins we have no record of and which probably belong to you. We are herewith returning them - at any rate we do not want them.

Very truly yours,

HW:JG

Curator